

TAKING AVP TO DIFFERENT CULTURES

Alternatives to Violence Project workshops were developed in prisons collaboratively by people of diverse cultures and backgrounds from both inside and outside prison. Workshops always have been strongest when there is diversity among team members and participants.

One of the hardest differences to bridge, however, is class. When AVP was in its early years in the United States, most AVP outside volunteers were from communities where the expectation was they would complete their education, find choices in their employment and lead lives that were comfortable and enabled them to have a voice in the government of their country. In sharp contrast, most incarcerated people came from communities where the expectations for education and opportunities for employment were limited greatly and they were disenfranchised from having a voice in the government of their country. Because of this dynamic, outside volunteer facilitators in those early years saw a need to prepare all people facilitating AVP in prison not only to get to know, understand and appreciate how to navigate, communicate and operate inside a prison, but also to grow in understanding and sensitivity to the experience of the incarcerated and the environment from which most of them came. Today, AVP/New York has a volunteer handbook (<http://www.avpny.org/?q=node/778>) for people going into prison that is the result of the combined experience of men and women who sometimes learned through the mistakes they made.

Since that time, AVP has spread to countries and cultures throughout the world. Again, we need to prepare AVP facilitators to work across different cultures, classes, languages and situations. It is especially important for facilitators to get to know, understand and appreciate the languages, customs and conditions of the people to whom they bring AVP. All AVP facilitators should be aware of and acknowledge the influence of imbalances of power on us: oppression and internalized oppression, colonization, racism and reverse racism. In AVP, we recognize we are all affected negatively by stereotyping; prejudice and exploitation; to deny this would make us complicate. We clearly state we do not want to live or act out of prejudice and oppression; so when anyone experiences something that feels prejudicial or oppressive, we ask that s/he speak up and we will listen to everyone in order to deal with it directly, patiently, compassionately and appreciatively and to make the changes that allow everyone to feel affirmed and included.

On every AVP facilitating team, people have varying strengths and weaknesses and commonly have differences in perspective or framework because of class, race, age or gender. These differences are our greatest strength. The team experience is always somewhat different in one's own country, but team members share an experience of living under the same laws or with the same freedoms or a certain base of understanding of the different cultures in their country. Whenever an AVP facilitator joins a team in another system, culture or location, s/he should frequently ask for feedback from someone intimately acquainted with that particular context and defer to their direction when response time is restricted.

Following are some guidelines offered by AVP facilitators who have taken AVP to countries other than their own:

Pre-planning.

1. Check that you are in relationship with what already has been established. Coordinate with existing local and regional AVP programs and notify AVP International so others can find you if they wish to be involved or initiate complementary work. Problems can come about in a country if it is not clear what groups are operating and how they are connected.
2. Address guardianship issues; connect the program to the international AVP community. In some countries, it is safer to go in under an established legal organization.
3. Be realistic about what AVP offers—amazing approaches and practices to personal and community transformation. Don't wittingly or unwittingly participate in elevating unrealistic expectations (particularly with less financially advantaged countries) that money will be available, e.g., for participation allowances, local transportation, food funds, hosting benefits,

foreign travel and so forth. Be aware this may be the primary motivation of many participants and personal dedication will become apparent over time. Especially in areas of conflict, people want a connection with the outside world. If this is the motivation for inviting AVP, it may not lead to sustainability.

4. The issue of sustaining the AVP organization in the host country should be considered before starting: what commitment can you make for continuing an AVP program long enough for a dedicated few to emerge, find one another and figure out how to collaborate? What basic administration do they have to learn about workshop reports, report storage, list of contacts, workshop team formation and scheduling, communication to interested participants, publicity of workshops, certificates and records of participation?
5. Nurture the organization beyond the workshops by investing genuine interest in local approaches and activities, encouraging routine coordination meetings, establishing monthly or other routine AVP community refresher events, including local leaders in the AVP community, greeting local leaders when you arrive and when you leave an area, integrating people from local informal and formal structures, seeking participants from all "sides" and so forth. In some places, AVP facilitators are required to spend a lot of time doing promotional work in the local community.
6. Some cultures value promptness; others do not. Each community has a different relationship to time and to communicating about time. Some people consistently want to do more in less time and habitually complain about time but actually don't expect or welcome changes in schedule consistent with their complaints. Others generally do not talk about time; but if they do, they expect an immediate schedule change. People experience a great deal of emotion around time issues, so it often helps to state plans or occurrences in as concrete a manner as possible, rather than in generalities or emotional language. It's advisable to do so as an addition to the cooperative agreement in the first session of a workshop if there are a significant number of people from different cultures. When you set up a schedule, make certain you organize some time off between some of the more intense training, just to rest and self-nurture.
7. Availability of time to train may also be an issue. In some places, it is realistic to run only a couple of workshops to let integration happen and not exhaust the trainees. Several rounds of workshops are needed to identify apprentices, give them opportunities to apprentice, develop facilitators, develop facilitator confidence and sort out a core group of dedicated facilitators. This often takes multiple rounds of workshops repeatedly over three to seven years. In areas of armed conflict or violence, current or former, it may take as much as a decade or more.

Queries as a Facilitator:

1. Am I physically hardy? Will I be able to keep up with the pace, working in unfamiliar and sometimes taxing situations, ready to be an exemplary ambassador for AVP?
2. Have I sought to build real community with my teammates—taking the time to build relationships and receive guidance?
3. Do I actively listen and accept feedback from teammates who may be less assertive and more culturally aware than I?
4. Do I know how and when to step back?
5. Do I trust others, allowing them to lead the situation? to lead the process?
6. Can I still feel strong connections when I'm limited to observation and non-verbal communication? Or, do I need to understand everything that is said to stay interested, focused and secure?
7. Does lack of control of language make me feel irritated, excluded, bored or out of control?
8. Do I get frustrated while immersed in a culture with profoundly internalized "isms" (sexism, racism, classism, homophobia)? Am I able to meet myself and others where we are?
9. If I am working through an interpreter, can I trim my language to communicate the essence of the message, rather than include extraneous details? Am I willing to work at this slower (and sometimes deeper) pace?
10. Am I okay if a workshop doesn't "work"?
11. Am I emotionally, psychologically and spiritually grounded and strong?

12. What sustains me? How will I get the emotional, psychological and spiritual support I will need to do the work from a grounded place? Who is my support community? How will I connect with them regularly?
13. Do I stress out when people are not on time or are obsessive about being on time?
14. Do I recognize my own habits, emotions and communication styles around time and how those compare to others? Do I have simple, concrete, non-emotional ways to bring up to the group differences in habits, emotions and communication styles around time?
15. Am I someone with a "let's go" approach or one who likes to check in with people's feelings on a regular basis? Will I be able to work with someone who has a style different from mine?
16. What values do I have based in my cultural upbringing? Which am I willing to sacrifice if it is in conflict with a value or more of the culture I am working in? Am I willing to act contrary to my cultural norms in matters that are not of universal significance?
17. Can I state up front that I want to be respectful of all people and cultures, so I am curious and inquisitive about what we know to be fundamental to human health, respect and dignity, and that I do not want to be prejudiced or insensitive? Can I invite people to be open and honest when something occurs that seems prejudicial or insensitive to someone so that we can discuss it?
18. Am I comfortable about exploring my own behaviors that seem prejudicial or insensitive to others?
19. What is "power" to me? Where do I have privilege, power and knowledge, and where will my co-facilitators have it?
20. What does respect look like to me, and how may my co-facilitators be looking at it differently? Do I ask my team members the best way to help and affirm them and give them feedback?
21. Do I assume if someone is polite, there are no cultural tensions between us? If I feel cultural tensions, do I raise them with others, or am I "polite" and do I try to ignore them?
22. What does my culture teach about equality of age, race, class and gender? Will the culture to which I am bringing AVP have the same concept of equality? If not, how and when will we discuss these issues?
23. What will I need from my co-facilitators, and what do I have to offer?
24. Am I drawn to this work out of a need to "help" others? Am I able to recognize when "help" is not help at all but rather seeks to disempower? Do I get caught in my need to "save" people from poverty, abuse or illness or do I seek to share the tools that have helped me to help myself? Am I aware of the personal agendas I have that may come from my desire to "help" others?
25. Am I aware if I have a need to earn value, rescue others, appease my guilt, escape through busy-ness, seek control or act on my frustration with the "state of the world"? If so, how can I work with my home AVP community to alleviate these feelings to address those issues, understanding that if I am unable to come to the work from a place of peace within and with myself and the world, my "help" will not be help at all and may in fact bring great harm to myself and others.
26. Am I acting out of a sense of being prepared, seeking friendships, understanding there are no enemies, clearly opposing conditions and acts of violence, abuse and neglect concretely? Do I use the resources I need responsibly and share the rest?
27. Do I accept that my view is incomplete, and seek to remain open to learning from others and seek the universality among people and celebrate the differences?

T4F Agendas Adapted to different cultures.

Some T4F Workshop agendas from AVP groups around the world are at: <http://avpusa.org/ftm> .